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Paolo Addis, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa;
Centro di ricerca Maria Eletta Martini, Lucca



Introduction

This collection of country reports is part of the research on Digital Skills, Accommodation and Technological Assistance for Employment, conducted by the European Disability Forum (EDF) with the support of [Google.org](https://www.google.org).

The aim of the study is to explore the situation of persons with disabilities in the open labour market, focusing in particular on the potential of digital skills training and the use of accessible and assistive technologies to foster inclusion in the workplace.

National experts from each EU Member State (with the exception of Luxembourg) and the UK analysed their respective national contexts. They outline policies and programmes to support reasonable accommodation as a Human Resources (HR) procedure, map trends in the use of accessible and assistive technologies in the workplace, and explain the main limitations experienced by employees with disabilities in acquiring accessible or assistive technology that meets their needs. They also analysed the barriers faced by persons with disabilities related to digital skills and highlight some good practices at national level.

The national reports cover the following countries: the UK, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Luxembourg is the only EU Member State that is not part of the study due to not finding a suitable national expert on the topic.

Glossary

Assistive devices: external devices that are designed, made, or adapted to assist a person to perform a particular task. Many people with disabilities depend on assistive devices to enable them to carry out daily activities and participate actively and productively in community or professional life.

Assistive technology: any item, piece of equipment, service or product system including software that is used to increase, maintain, substitute or improve functional capabilities of persons with disabilities or for, alleviation and compensation of impairments, activity limitations or participation restrictions.

Disability allowance: payments that persons with disabilities can receive from the State to cover basic living costs and services.

Discrimination: any distinction, exclusion or restriction on the basis of one or several grounds (sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.) that damages or nullifies the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field, on an equal basis with others.

European Union (EU): a unique economic and political union between 27 European countries, as it stands at the time of publication of this report.

EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC): a regular cross-sectional and longitudinal sample survey by Eurostat that provides data on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions in the European Union.

General Comment: a General Comment is a treaty body's interpretation of human rights treaty provisions, thematic issues or its methods of work. General Comments often seek to clarify the reporting duties of State Parties with respect to certain treaty provisions and suggest approaches to implementing those provisions.

Member State(s) (of the EU): the EU currently consists of 27 countries, also called "Member States". Each Member State is party to the founding treaties of the European Union and is therefore subject to the privileges and obligations of membership. Unlike members of most international organisations, the Member States of the EU are subject to binding laws in exchange for their representation within the common legislative and judicial institutions.

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Number of observations (n): indicates the number of employers each national expert managed to interview.

Open labour market: this refers to work in a mainstream or “regular” employment setting, as opposed to a setting that has been created specifically to employ a specific group of employees, such as persons with disabilities.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD): represent the interests of their members with disabilities and have the mandate to advocate for the realisation of their human rights and lobby for the consideration of their interests.

Percentage points: this term expresses the arithmetic difference of two percentages, whereas percent (%) refers to the rate of change. For example, if Country A has an employment rate of 30% and Country B has an employment rate of 60%, Country B’s employment rate is 30 percentage points higher than Country A’s but is also higher by 100%.

Persons with disabilities: individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Reasonable accommodation: the necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. To be “reasonable”, the accommodation cannot impose a disproportionate or undue burden. Denial of reasonable accommodation is a form of discrimination.

The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI): an index that the European Commission reports between 2014-2022, monitoring Europe’s overall digital performance and tracks the progress of EU countries in their digital competitiveness.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD): an international human rights treaty that reaffirms that all persons with disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The CRPD clarifies that all persons with disabilities have the right to participate in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural life of the community in the same way as anyone else.

National Overview

According to Eurostat data (2023), in Italy, the disability employment gap is 13%, which is considerably below the EU average and has slightly decreased compared to the past. It should also be noted that the Italian employment rate for persons without basic activity difficulties (59%) is significantly below the EU-27 average (67%). The employment rate for persons with disabilities (46%) is roughly in line with the EU average (47%)¹.

Regarding national sources, it must be emphasised that the lack of updated and reliable statistics on the living conditions of persons with disabilities is a structural problem. Article 21 of Law No. 68 of 1999 ("Basic Law regarding the Right to Work of Persons with Disabilities") mandates that the government present a report based on data provided by the regions every two years. However, the tenth report, originally scheduled for 30 June 2019 and filed in May 2023, refers to data from 2016-2018².

Although the Italian Constitution opens with the solemn declaration that "Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labour" (Article 1) and Article 4 states that "The Republic recognises the right of all citizens to work and promotes those conditions which render this right effective," persons with disabilities in Italy are still struggling to achieve the full and real recognition of their right to work.

In March 2021, during a hearing in front of the Scientific Committee of the National Observatory on Disability, Gian Carlo Blangiardo, president of the National Institute of Statistics (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, Istat), emphasised that "the disadvantage of persons with disabilities in the labour market remains significant" and that "in 2019, taking into account the working-age population (15-64), the employment rate of persons with severe disabilities was 32.2%"³.

Moreover, Istat data highlights that persons with disabilities attain lower levels in their careers and show lower levels of satisfaction with their working life than persons without disabilities. Interviewed stakeholders confirmed this gap between rights on paper and reality.

The causes are numerous: lack of political will at both national and regional/local levels, insufficiently dissuasive sanctions for employers, inadequate funding of public policies regarding labour inclusion and workplace accessibility, paternalistic and stereotypical attitudes towards persons with disabilities, and lack of awareness about their rights.

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Finally, it should be noted that, generally, employers contacted during the DATA project adopted an uncooperative attitude. As stated off the record by an HR manager, "Disability is a sensitive issue for us [as a well-known company], and we know that if deficiencies were to emerge, we would be damaged. So, we just avoid talking about it."

Digital Skills

Recently, Eurostat and Istat have highlighted that Italy ranks fourth from last in Europe for basic digital skills. To meet the objectives set at the EU level, Italy will need to achieve an average annual increase of 3.8 percentage points in the coming years. This would be a substantial increase in a short period, a rate observed during the pandemic years (2020-2021) when the share of regular internet users rose from 76.4% to 80.1%⁴. It should be noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital divide for persons with disabilities was particularly evident.

In terms of educational inclusion, e-learning ('Didattica a distanza', DAD), widely adopted in 2020 and 2021, posed complex challenges. The presence and usability of adequate technologies and the accessibility of the space played a fundamental role in encouraging the participation of students with disabilities in inclusive teaching. Istat data indicates that "the reasons that made it difficult for students with disabilities to participate in distance learning are various; among the most frequent are the severity of the pathology (27%), the difficulty of family members in collaborating (20%), and socio-economic hardship (17%). For a smaller but significant percentage of children, the reasons for exclusion included the difficulty in adapting the Educational Plan for Inclusion (PEI) to distance learning (6%), the lack of technological tools (6%), and, for a residual part, the lack of specific teaching aids (3%)"⁵.

Furthermore, national data shows a strong territorial imbalance. The southern regions generally have lower digital skills: Calabria (33.8% of citizens/Internet users in the last three months and between 16 and 74 years old with at least basic digital skills), Sicily (34%), and Campania (34.2%) lag behind Lazio (52.9%), Friuli Venezia Giulia (51.3%), and the autonomous province of Trento (51.7%). Moreover, in Italy, as in other EU countries, digital literacy is characterised by strong gaps associated with the socio-cultural background of the population: technological and digital skills are still primarily held by people with higher educational qualifications⁶. Finally, it should be noted that digital skills levels are marked by a significant gender inequality in favour of men.

The framework described above explains why recent strategy documents include substantial investment in improving basic digital skills: the National Strategy for Digital Skills⁷, adopted in July 2020 under the remit of the Digital Republic policy initiative, includes a range of measures to enhance digital skills across various sectors to support economic development. The Digital Italy 2026 strategy⁸ aims

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to enhance ultra-fast broadband networks over the entire national territory as a necessary pre-condition to harnessing the benefits of digitalisation, and more generally to fully achieving a digital society⁹.

Italian NRRP measures aim to improve the described scenario through financial support (80 million EUR) for various initiatives. These include accessibility tests on approximately 23,000 websites and mobile apps, awareness, communication, and dissemination initiatives, development of web kits, and technical and financial support to improve the accessibility of public service contact points (PNRR 'Italia domani', 2021).

Digital skills are part of the mainstream education path, but data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) placed Italy in first place in Europe for lack of ICT training for teachers¹⁰. Law No. 107 of 2015 introduced a new tool, the National Digital School Plan (Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale), aiming to innovate the school system and increase opportunities for digital education. However, OPD-interviewed persons did not consider the results of the National Digital School Plan. Further investigation will be needed to clarify the impact of such measures over the medium to long term.

Some non-profit entities take charge of digital literacy. Recently, an umbrella organisation, the Forum del Terzo Settore, highlighted that third sector organisations can play a role in collaborating with public entities, "actively participating in improving the accessibility of digital services and, more generally, in the harmonisation of public practices towards common quality standards"¹¹.

One of the OPD interviewed during the DATA Project indicated a good practice carried out by a third sector organisation: the ASPHI Foundation, based in Bologna and active since 1980, promotes the inclusion of people with disabilities in school, work, and society through the use of effective digital technologies, involving people with disabilities, their families, public entities, school institutions, and the business community¹².

Finally, the "Permanent Census of Non-Profit Institutions", published by Istat in May 2023, underscores that "the digital transition process is undertaken in a heterogeneous manner by non-profit organisations"¹³. Given the importance of the third sector in the protection of the rights of people with disabilities, this aspect should not be overlooked.

As already mentioned, for persons with disabilities, digital skills and the accessibility of technological tools are crucial issues, especially considering that employers value digital literacy and expect potential employees to have developed valuable computer skills before the hiring process.

Surprisingly, our survey (n=20) indicates that Italian employers consider technological skills an asset, but the majority (70%) do not see a lack of digital skills as a barrier to hiring persons with disabilities. This could be explained by the tendency of employers to consider hiring people with disabilities for lower positions within the company hierarchy. In particular, persons with psychosocial disabilities are stereotypically seen as suitable for repetitive, low-tech jobs.

Evidence collected shows that digital training programmes are not specifically tailored to people with disabilities (one of our respondents explicitly stated that “[their] digital training initiatives are open to every person on [their] staff,” without clarifying if training programmes are fully accessible). Recently, research carried out by the Politecnico di Milano Graduate School of Management highlighted that “digital transformation is the most relevant issue, indicated as such by 47% of large companies and SMEs,” and that “75% of the companies interviewed declare that they leverage the ease of use of digital tools for the diffusion of technological solutions, highlighting the importance of user-friendly interfaces and solutions.” However, the accessibility of such digital tools is not considered¹⁴.

Italian OPD representatives underlined that technological tools (hardware and software) often cannot be easily interfaced with each other; one of our respondents – a skilled IT specialist with a sensory disability – emphasised that even for her, a basic software update “can result in a mess and working hours lost.” Some respondents remarked that “digital training is expensive and not adequately funded”.

Assistive Technologies

In Italy, the availability of assistive technologies still lags behind. The second “Biennial Action Programme regarding the implementation of the rights of persons with disabilities” (hereinafter, BPA), approved in 2017, proposes to “make the use of forms of public financing automatic and complete for interventions and assistive technology with high technological content, too with reference to the removal of physical barriers”, underlining a serious lack of knowledge “on the principles of accessibility and universal design, on technical solutions, assistive and home automation technologies, transport systems, etc., ensuring concrete improvements in urban systems, public buildings and private”¹⁵.

From a legal standpoint, it should be noted that Art. 14 of the mentioned Law no. 68 of 1999 requires every region to create a special fund for the labour inclusion of persons with disabilities, “financed with the amounts derived from the imposition of the administrative sanctions provided for by this law and the contributions paid by employers pursuant to this law, as well as the contribution of foundations, private bodies and interested parties”. These resources can be used to contribute “for the partial lump sum reimbursement of the expenses necessary for the adoption of reasonable accommodations in favour of workers with a reduction in working capacity of more than 50%, including the development of teleworking technologies or the removal of architectural barriers that limit in any way the work integration of the person with disabilities a disability, as well as to establish the person responsible for job placement in the workplace”.

Evidence collected shows that Italian employers (n=20) are unfamiliar with the concept of assistive technologies in the workplace: 75% of those who responded are not aware of the possibilities offered by assistive technologies, and 90% of employers do not have a targeted policy regarding assistive technologies. Some employers have adopted procedures for employees with visual impairment, providing software and hardware.

It should be noted that OPDs highlighted a lack of correct information and awareness about AT investments, producing a paradoxical outcome. In Italy, many employers do not fulfil their quota obligations to hire people with disabilities, leading to fines that flow into the aforementioned regional fund, without knowing that resources from the fund are available to invest in assistive technologies and workplace accessibility. Additionally, OPD responders emphasized bureaucracy, little attention from assistive technology manufacturers

themselves, and a lack of “disincentives for those [employers] who do not use assistive technologies”. A respondent highlighted a bottleneck regarding the adoption of even not particularly advanced solutions: “if such solutions are not too expensive, workers with disabilities prefer to adopt them by paying out of their own pocket, even if they would be entitled to a refund”. Arguably, in this way, some workers with disabilities prefer facing an economic burden rather than dealing with their employers or public providers and their paternalistic attitudes.

Reasonable Accommodation

First of all, it must be underlined that the concept of reasonable accommodation has struggled to establish itself in the Italian legal context.

Currently, the duty of reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities is set out by Article 3(3-bis) of Legislative Decree No. 216 of 9 July 2003. This article was introduced in 2013 to comply with the decision of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), which condemned Italy for the incomplete transposition of Article 5, Directive 2000/78/CE¹⁶. To date, the Italian approach to reasonable accommodations seems to rely on financial incentives; in particular, the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work (Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro – INAIL) supports employers in fulfilling the obligation to adopt reasonable accommodations, financing interventions for the professional integration of persons with disabilities¹⁷. Finally, it must be remarked that the denial of a reasonable accommodation is considered discrimination under Law No. 67 of 1st March 2006¹⁸.

Evidence collected during DATA show that employers (n=20) are not even very familiar with the concept of reasonable accommodation. 80% of employers do not adopt a standard approach to “reasonable accommodations”. One of the responders contacted the interviewer asking if he could receive more information and corporate training about such a promising tool (!).

Unsurprisingly, public programmes supporting reasonable accommodations are substantially unknown within the reference sample: 95% of employers (n=20) are unaware of the existence of financing programmes in this regard.

This lack of awareness is worrying and reflects the lack of consideration for reasonable accommodation highlighted by OPDs. Recently, delegation Law no. 227 of 2021¹⁹ provided that the delegated legislation will revise Law no. 104 of 1992²⁰, introducing a definition of “reasonable accommodation” and providing adequate protection instruments consistent with the UNCRPD. Hopefully, this will increase knowledge of reasonable accommodation in the Italian political and economic sphere.

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